

Unity Temple
(The Unitarian-Universalist Church)
875 Lake Street (corner of Lake
Street and Kenilworth Avenue)
Oak Park
Cook County
Illinois

HABS No. ILL-1093

HABS
ILL,
16-OAKPA,
3-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
801 - 19th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. ILL-1093

UNITY TEMPLE (THE UNITARIAN-UNIVERSALIST CHURCH)

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Location: 875 Lake Street, corner of Lake Street and Kenilworth Avenue, Oak Park, Cook County, Illinois.

Present Owner: The Illinois Universalist Convention.

Present Occupant: The Unitarian-Universalist Church in Oak Park.

Present Use: Church.

Statement of Significance: Frank Lloyd Wright's design for Unity Church was conceived with the prime objective of giving exterior expression to a room of worship by subordinating the smaller auxiliary functions to the main room. One of the earliest experiments in the use of reinforced concrete in the United States, with the pebble aggregate exposed on the surface for texture, this church has a clearly defined exterior expression with its square stair towers at the corners giving added emphasis to the importance of the main room. The high windows, under the projecting roof slabs, separated by the ornamental masonry piers, give to the whole a perfect sense of scale and a true indication of the actual size of the building. [Adapted from Alan Burnham in the Architectural Record, Vol. 120 (December 1956), p. 180.]

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: Legal description: Lot 3 in Scoville's Subdivision of Lot 17 in Kettlestrings' Subdivision of lands in the Southeast corner of the Northwest quarter of Section 7, Township 39N, Range 13E, of the third principal meridian of Cook County.

Chain of title: From the Chicago Title and Trust Company, tract book 133-2: J. W. Kettlestrings sold Lot 3 to Abram Gale, April 3, 1868 (Document 9168). Gale passed the property to Edwin O. Gale and Charles A. Welch, jointly, February 22, 1882 (Document 377454). Edwin O. Gale sold part of the property to the Unity Church of Oak Park, October 14, 1905 (Document 3770993). The part of the property is described thusly: Commencing 5 feet west of the northeast corner then south 149.1 feet then west 100 feet to a point 60 feet east of the western line of the

lot, then north 150.9 feet to the northern line of the lot, then east to the point of beginning. Edwin O. Gale sold a second portion of the lot to Unity Church, April 28, 1906 (Document 3867507). This second portion is described thusly: Beginning at a point 60 feet east of the west line of the lot (being on the east line of Kenilworth Avenue), then south 20 feet, then east to a point 5 feet west of the east line of the lot, and 169.1 feet south of the north line of the lot, then north on said line 20 feet to a point 149.1 feet south of the north line of the lot, then west to point of beginning. Julia E. Gale sold a third portion of the lot to Unity Church, April 8, 1915 (Document 5623453). This third portion of the lot may be described thusly: Part of the eastern 105 feet of Lot 3, beginning on the west line of the east 105 feet of Lot 3, said point being on the east line of Kenilworth Avenue, 170.9 feet south of the north line thereof, then south on east line of said avenue 75 feet, then east on a straight line to east line of Lot 3 at a point 244.1 feet south of north line thereof, then north along east line 75 feet to a point 169.1 feet south of north line thereof, then west to point of beginning. The Unity Church of Oak Park handed over the deed to the contiguous three pieces of property to the Illinois Universalist Convention, March 31, 1933 (Document 11253120).

2. Date of erection: June 1906 to June 1907, approximately. The building permit was issued June 2, 1906. Grant Manson, Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910: The First Golden Age (New York: Reinhold, 1958), p. 159, states that the church was incomplete in April 1907, but that it was dedicated shortly thereafter.
3. Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959).
4. Builder: Paul S. T. Mueller is named in the building permit. Frank Lloyd Wright, An Autobiography (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1932. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943), p. 159, states: "now Paul Mueller comes to the rescue, reads the scheme like easy print. Will build it for only a little over their appropriation-- and does it." The cost of the building, according to the building permit, was to be \$33,000, but Wright names the sum \$45,000 Ibid., p. 154/.
5. Original plan and construction: The intentions of the architect and the parti of the church are clearly set forth in Rodney F. Johnnot, The New Edifice of Unity Church, Oak Park, Illinois (Oak Park: The New Unity Church Club (private), June 1906). The main points of this essay

as well as the description of the designing of the church in the Autobiography are these:

- a. The most important single item was the creation of a room for the worship of God, which would be served by other areas for the service of man. But the room was to be the central element.
 - b. The material--because of the limited funds and the large number of people to be housed, some 400, concrete suggested itself at the outset of the design. Besides being an inexpensive material in itself, if the usual facing could be eliminated and the concrete form its own finish, the cost could be kept low. Since the major determinant of the construction cost would be the formwork, reuse of the same forms would be the best way to keep the cost down. This meant a square form, with bilateral symmetry. The greater part of the parti was determined by the material used.
 - c. Siting--turning the entrance away from the streets, towards the rear of the lot would keep the traffic noise of the trolleys out of the meeting room. Though Wright does not mention the fact, placing the windows high in the walls, in the manner of clerestory windows, would also keep the noise level down.
 - d. Auxiliary areas--the rooms not directly related to the worship areas are pulled away and grouped in a rectangular building at the back of the lot. A large entry hall then is placed between the structures and unites the two major masses.
 - e. The room--the roof of the meeting room is supported by four massive hollow piers. Double galleries are placed between the piers on three sides of the square. Stairs are placed in four short towers in the corners of the square.
 - f. Lighting--the roof over the meeting room becomes a waffle slab with skylights in the depressions of the framework. Electric lights are placed above the amber glass in the skylight.
6. Alterations and additions: The first alterations consisted of interior repairs and painting of the church. Because of financial problems, the refurbishing was done on a do-it-yourself basis, with the cooperation of William Wesley Peters and John Howe. The work was accomplished during the summer and fall of 1961.

The second alterations were the removal of the little-used cloak rooms below the auditorium, and the enclosing of four new class rooms, and the reconstruction of new washroom facilities. The building permit was issued July 27, 1966. The architect was John J. Michiels, 219 S. Grove, Oak Park. The general contractor was Hoppe Construction Co., Park Ridge, Illinois.

B. Sources of Information:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Original drawings for Unity Church are at Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin; negative photostat copies are at the American Institute of Architects headquarters, Washington, D.C.

A construction detail on tracing paper is in the Wright drawing collection of the Avery Architectural Library, New York City, New York. The detail is of windows in Unity House, and is not dated.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Architectural Record. Vol. 120 (December 1956), p. 180.

Two statements regarding Unity Church; part of a four page article on outstanding American churches, one of which is Unity Church. The statements are by Alan Burnham and Buford Pickens.

Casabella Continuita. Number 227, insert following p. 14.

The text of the article is an excerpt from An Autobiography concerning the church.

Chicago Architectural Photograph Company has the following photograph: No. 2937, a straight-on view of the auditorium and pulpit, similar to Fig. 120 in Hitchcock.

"Frank Lloyd Wright Showpiece Gets a Bright New Cloak," Midwest Magazine, supplement to the Chicago Tribune, Sunday, December 10, 1961.

Color photographs of interior redecoration taken by Charles Gekler.

Hitchcock, Henry Russel. In the Nature of Materials. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942.

The comprehensive monograph and catalog of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright up to 1942. Contains a short discussion of the Unity Church, with four photographs and a plan.

Inland Architect and News Record. Vol. 52, No. 5 (December 1908), p. 77.

Text only, a description of Unity Temple, repeating the booklet written by Dr. Johonnot, The New Ediface of Unity Church, Oak Park, Illinois.

Johonnot, Rodney F. The New Ediface of Unity Church, Oak Park, Illinois. Oak Park: The New Unity Church Club (private), June 1906.

Architectural facts reissued 1961 by the congregation of Unity Church.

A complete discussion of the design and intent of the new church, written with Wright. Contains separate plans of all floor levels, side, front and interior perspective drawings.

Manson, Grant Carpenter. Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910: The First Golden Age. New York: Reinhold, 1958.

A detailed analysis of the first period of Wright. Chapter 3 is devoted to a discussion of Unity Church, pp. 156-162. Four photographs of the church and one plan. Discussed in conjunction with the church is the project for the Abraham Lincoln Center.

Scully, Vincent J. Jr. Frank Lloyd Wright. New York: Braziller, 1960.

Discussion of the church, pp. 20-21.

"Unity Restored," Architectural Review, Vol. 131 (January 1962), pp. 5-6.

Note in "Marginalia" concerning the restoration of Unity Church by the congregation and William Wesley Peters. See note on alterations above.

Wright, Frank Lloyd. An Autobiography. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1932. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943.

Comprehensive statement by the architect on his work. A detailed description of the designing of Unity Church is set down, pp. 153-160. Reprinted in Kaufmann, Edgar and Ben Raeburn, Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings. Cleveland: World Publishing Co., pp. 74-83.

Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe von Frank Lloyd Wright. Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1910. Republished: Buildings, Plans and Designs. New York: Horizon Press, 1963.

The early and complete monograph of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright up to 1910. Unity Church is shown on plates 62, 63, 64 and 65.

_____. "In the Cause of Architecture,"
Architectural Record, Vol. 28 (March 1908), pp. 155-
221.

The second major publication of Wright's work.
Contains photographs of Unity Church:

- p. 212 model
- p. 213 composite plan
- p. 214 perspective rendering
- p. 215 construction photograph.

Yale University Photograph Collection.

In the collection is a construction photograph of
Unity Church. The forms are about halfway up the
walls. The form of the walls is hardly visible for
the shoring.

C. Supplemental Material:

"After the great Prairie houses and the Larkin Building, Unity Church in Oak Park, designed in 1905 and several years in building, is justly famous. Wright had been interested in poured concrete for several years, but this was the first time he--or for that matter anyone else perhaps--had used it for a monumental public edifice. He persuaded his Universalist clients on the score of economy and attempted to take the curse off its dead surfaces by exposing the fine pebble aggregate. The building was to Wright an exercise in the "temple" form, square externally with solid stair-towers at the corners, cross-shaped within with the arms above the corridors filled by sloping galleries, and amply lighted by clerestoreys and skylights (Fig. 119). The exterior is solemn and formal, expressive of its monolithic construction, the large scale of its parts established by the necessary thickness of the projecting roof slab. Except for the vines that have sometimes covered it, the solemnity is lightened chiefly by abstract "capitals" at the top of the clerestorey piers (Fig. 122). Such a heavy mass, such restraint in plastic composition, could hold its own in any environment; it is perhaps almost too strong for suburban Oak Park (Fig. 118).

"The interior is more complex, with a remarkable sort of space composition (Fig. 120). The auditorium floor is higher than the surrounding corridors into which the space flows beneath the galleries. Four piers define the central square out of which project the short arms toward the clerestoreys. All minor elements, such as the balcony parapets and the grid of the ceiling skylight, repeat an interlocking frame of lines in space. But the lines are not mere lines, they are structural as well and contrast as thick solid members with the voids of the plaid of space between, while the ceiling extends into the

outside space and is seen through the clerestorey windows as the underside of the cantilevered roof slab. The electric fixtures were heated [sic. perhaps 'treated'] frankly as part of the architecture and even their wires became part of the design. This was in its way as revolutionary as the specially designed office fittings in the Larkin Building. Without a congregation the effect may be somewhat severe. And as in all non-ritualistic churches the pulpit end of the auditorium seems to lack focus. Doubtless also the balance and finish of the original colour scheme has been lost with repainting.

"The church is entered through colonnades something like "cloisters" which connect the church with Parish House. These colonnades lighten the composition, recalling the clerestoreys of the main block and of the similar but smaller Parish House block. Thus toward the side street, where the main entrance is, there is considerable breadth and variety, the asymmetrical balance recalling that of the Hillside Home School."

[Henry Russel Hitchcock, In the Nature of Materials (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942), pp. 53-54.]

"Unity Church, of 1906, also creates an ideal interior space, and it does so like the Larkin Building, through an organization of wall planes and piers (plates 33-35). As an abstract mass, it is much denser than the other. Its exterior both closes and opens, protecting by expressing the rich interweaving of spaces inside. It is not challenging but at once secret and full of promise. Though uncompromisingly monumental it is scaled to the individual rather than to the office hive. The concrete of the exterior has a pebbled aggregate which makes it sympathetic to the touch. The building thus encloses and invites. Its union of these opposites must have seemed to the free-thinking congregation for which it was built an ideal expression of the character of modern religious experience. In his Autobiography Wright has described with admirable lucidity how he assembled the poured elements of the structure in order to form the space he desired.²⁵ That space is again a hieratic progress: along a slightly raised platform at the side between two blocks, under a low entrance, into a dark place beyond which, after a tortuous passage, the main meeting place opens as an embracing room. Four piers stand at the corners within the shells of the outer walls, and balconies are woven between them. These are low, as in Colonial meeting houses, and here, as there, the congregation is brought close to the preacher in its tightly packed square. The interweaving of main masses and details now becomes symphonic, itself a hymn full of deep chords and complicated polyphonic passages. But the general effect is calm. The light is almost golden from the tinted skylights above, warmly alive with Froebel patterns, and integrally set between the crossed concrete beams of the

ceiling structure. In Unity Temple, therefore, Wright was interpreting both his time and its memories. In terms of the history of Protestantism on this continent it still remains the most modern and the most traditional church built in twentieth century America. It is a mighty fortress at individual scale, for the individual who, however packed in with others, remains spiritually alone."

/Vincent J. Scully, Jr., Frank Lloyd Wright (New York: Braziller, 1960), pp. 20-21./

Prepared by Leland M. Roth
Historian
National Park Service
Summer 1967

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Frank Lloyd Wright's design for Unity Church was conceived with the prime objective of giving exterior expression to a room of worship by subordinating the smaller auxiliary functions to the main room. One of the earliest experiments in the use of reinforced concrete in the United States, with the pebble aggregate exposed on the surface for texture, this church has a clearly defined exterior expression with its square stair towers at the corners giving added emphasis to the importance of the main room. The high windows, under the projecting roof slabs, separated by the ornamental masonry piers, give to the whole a perfect sense of scale and a true indication of the actual size of the building. /Adapted from Alan Burnham in the Architectural Record, Vol. 120 (December 1956), p. 180./

2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Two wings with a connecting unit, all symmetrical on a longitudinal axis; 142'-0" x 91'-6"; the church wing has two and a half stories above a cellar, and the rest of the building has two stories with no cellar except a small one at the south end.
2. Foundations: Reinforced concrete. There is a wide, two-step water table around the entire building.

3. Wall construction, finish: The walls are reinforced concrete, with exposed surfaces. The building has been painted a color not much different from that of natural concrete.
4. Structural system, framing: The structure is reinforced concrete. Photostats of the original working drawings show steel I-beams embedded at the front edges of the church balconies. It also appears on these drawings that steel was used for the spans of the ceiling skylights of the church and the fellowship hall.
5. Porches and bulkheads: The entrance porches at either side of the building are paved in concrete and have bulkheads matching the building walls.
6. Chimneys: The chimney is enlarged beyond functional needs as a design element at the south end of the building.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The banks of doors on the two exterior walls of the foyer are set between oak mullions. The door stiles and rails are of oak and the glazing is in one area comprising most of the door. Rather wide, flat lead comes hold small pieces of clear glass in a rectilinear pattern. The oak stiles and rails are severely weathered.
 - b. Windows: Behind the banks of sculptured columns at the church wing and at the fellowship wing, extending the full width of these openings, are wide single sash subdivided in rectilinear patterns by means of lead comes.
 - c. Skylights: The inner glazing of the skylights is generally of a warm yellow-orange tone. Lead comes again provide the patterning in the glass.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The skylights are roofed with steeply pitched glass roofs. Parapet walls conceal the skylight of the church almost completely, but do not mask that over the fellowship hall. The rest of the roofs are flat, of concrete roofed with built-up roofing.

- b. Eaves: The fascia of the church roofs is now copper. The rest are of exposed concrete, the upper surfaces of which are defaced with irregular brushings of bitumen.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor plan: One enters at the middle of the long side of the building from either the east or the west, for the building is symmetrical about the longitudinal axis. The central space in the plan is the foyer. To the south is the fellowship hall, rectangular in plan. One enters the long side of this space. To the north of the foyer is the church, square in plan. The main floor of the church is half a story higher than the floor of the foyer, but one enters it at either side, walking under the side balconies to the rear (north end) of the auditorium and ascending the half story at that point.
 - b. Second floor plan: The second floor is partly accessible from the balconies of the church. Two rooms are placed directly above the foyer; they may be a study and reception room. In the fellowship area, balconies at the east and west end of this space and a connecting room at the south are accessible from this area. Under the raised floor of the church is a cellar now remodeled for use as classrooms, etc.
- 2. Stairways: The church has four separate stairways in detached square towers; all are of concrete.
 - 3. Flooring: Flooring is concrete throughout, steel trowelled to a smooth finish.
 - 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster throughout.
 - 5. Doorways and doors: Doors are generally of oak, single panel.
 - 6. Decorative features and trim: Flat strips of dark oak 1-1/2" x 3/8" and 2-1/2" x 5/8" in cross section, are used as trim to lend geometrical emphasis to the interior. Wright's concern with the square and rectangle in his design of the building is emphasized through his use of these forms to accentuate the volume and sense of space in the interior.

7. Lighting, type of fixtures: The suspended fixtures in the church and the fellowship hall are of interest. Several of these hang from cantilevered brackets made up of oak strips which are also used to construct the suspension and the framing members. The lighting is accomplished through white glass globes or colored glass boxes. The design of the strips in the fixtures repeats that of the panel strips on the walls and ceilings.
8. Heating: The building is centrally heated and ventilated. A boiler and radiators accomplish the heating. A central ventilating fan circulates air through the hollow box columns of the church and through a column that stands by the stairs in the fellowship hall. Grills of oak conceal the openings in the columns. A wide fireplace in the fellowship hall is boarded up.

D. Site:

General setting and orientation: The longitudinal axis of the building runs north-south. The north side of the building faces Lake Street; the west side, Kenilworth Avenue. There is a conventional, steep-roofed church of yellow Joliet limestone across Lake Street from Unity Temple, a post office of American modern style of the 1920's and 1930's across Kenilworth Avenue. A parking lot on the east separates the building from multi-story apartment house. The minister's house is on the next lot to the south, followed by other frame houses dating from before the turn of the century. The main shopping center of Oak Park lies a few blocks to the east; a large city park, and the town's public library are north of the church.

Oak Park is about thirteen miles to the west and slightly to the north of Chicago's central business district and is well served by rapid transit.

Prepared by Wesley Shank
Supervisory Architect
National Park Service
June 1967

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The records of this structure were made during the 1967 Chicago IV Project. This was the fourth in a series of summer projects designed to record the significant architecture of the Chicago area. The project was sponsored by the late Mr. Earl J. Reed, FAIA. He was assisted by John R. Fugard, FAIA, Treasurer, and Miss Agnes E. Hodges of the Chicago Chapter Foundation, and a Selection Committee consisting of

James Arkin, AIA; Ruth Schoneman, Art Institute of Chicago; and J. Carson Webster, Northwestern University. Organizations cooperating with HABS in this project were: The Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects; the Chicago Chapter Foundation; the Chicago Community Trust; the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies; the Illinois Arts Council; and the Chicago Heritage Committee. The Council also made funds available for a Statewide Inventory Project with out-of-Chicago architects cooperating. Quarters were provided at Glessner House through the Chicago School of Architecture Foundation.

Mr. James C. Massey, Chief, Historic American Buildings Survey, was in over-all charge of HABS summer programs. The Project Supervisor was Wesley Shank, Iowa State University. Other members of the summer team were: Historian, Leland Roth, University of Illinois, Urbana; Photographer, Philip Turner; Secretary, Mrs. Burt Schloss; and Student Assistant Architects: Keleal Hassin, Tulane University; Maurice Griffin, Illinois Institute of Technology; Allan Steenhusen and David Vyverberg, Iowa State University.

ADDENDUM TO
UNITY TEMPLE
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875 Lake Street
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
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